

# We're having an FDR moment

By: [Joe Nathanson](#) November 25, 2021

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"Infrastructure Week" finally arrived. What had become a running joke during the four years of the previous administration became a tangible reality on Nov. 15, with the signing of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act into law by President Joe Biden.

The bill's passage actually signals many infrastructure weeks in the years ahead as the \$1.2 trillion contained in the measure, including about \$550 billion in new funding, begin coursing through the nation's cities, suburbs, and rural areas.

That same week was bookended by passage in the U.S. House of Representatives of H.R. 5376, officially named by the president as the Build Back Better Act. The so-called "human infrastructure" bill, scaled back from much larger spending proposals, would direct \$1.75 trillion to support investments in affordable, quality child care, universal pre-school for 3- and 4-year-olds, home health care, four weeks of paid family leave, affordable housing, expansion of Medicare benefits, and actions to provide clean energy and address climate change.

In an effort to delay the inevitable passage of the bill in his chamber, House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy staged an 8-and-a-half-hour marathon oration. At one point, he derided the legislation and said that "Nobody elected (Joe Biden) to be FDR." That was reportedly greeted by cries of "I did" and "Me too" by some in the majority party.

Even voices outside of Congress are saying this is, indeed, "an FDR moment." They are, of course invoking the large-scale actions undertaken as part of the New Deal during the presidency of Franklin D. Roosevelt in response to the Great Depression.

Some of those voices belong to grandchildren of the New Dealers with some strong opinions on the matter. They include James Roosevelt, Jr. grandson of Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt; Henry Scott Wallace, grandson of FDR's first vice president, Henry Wallace; Tomlin Perkins Coggeshall, grandson of Frances Perkins, FDR's labor secretary; and June Hopkins, granddaughter of Harry Hopkins, a close adviser to FDR in crafting of the New Deal.

In a letter to The Hill, the four grandchildren write, "Biden was elected to emulate FDR. Biden talked about him constantly during the campaign. Days before the election, he gave an

entire speech devoted to FDR's example — not in some random battleground location, but in Warm Springs, Ga., where FDR lived — for polio treatment — and ultimately died.”

These New Deal descendants go on to say “(Biden) made clear in spring of 2020 that he was planning an “FDR-sized presidency.” He said that the crises that would confront the next president were big enough to “eclipse what FDR faced.”

### **Embracing comparison**

After taking office, Biden sat down with prominent historians to discuss lessons from the New Deal and proposed a Civilian Climate Corps modeled on FDR's wildly successful Civilian Conservation Corps. He seems to love the FDR comparisons and has FDR's portrait in the place of honor above the fireplace in the Oval Office.”

These opinionated descendants see the enactment of the bipartisan infrastructure bill as a big first step, with investments in the nation's physical infrastructure. They characterize it as “a modern version of the New Deal's transformative programs to bring electricity to neglected rural areas, bringing broadband internet to more than 30 million neglected rural Americans.”

The now-enacted infrastructure legislation will have its impact in the years ahead in the form of improved highways, repairs to failing bridges and tunnels (think of Baltimore's Frederick Douglass, aka B&P Tunnel), electric charging stations and incentives to purchase electric vehicles, and replacement of lead pipes to provide clean drinking water. It also will direct investments to local transit systems and, a favorite of “Amtrak Joe,” substantial funding for improvements to intercity rail.

But some would say that the continuing crises of the coronavirus pandemic, the economic fallout from that grave health emergency, the increasing calls for dealing with racial injustice, and the existential threat posed by climate change all call for still bolder action. They see the Build Back Better Act as among the bold steps needed now.

The New Deal grandchildren conclude their long letter with these words: “These are the boldest investments in the American people since FDR's New Deal. Build Back Better has the potential to provide Americans from all walks of life with greater confidence and security to reach for their dreams. Our ancestors would be all for it.”

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